

## Annotated records of the Greater Glider *Petauroides volans* from *The Victorian Naturalist* 1884-2005

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### Abstract

A survey of *The Victorian Naturalist* was undertaken for records of the Greater Glider *Petauroides volans*. This report compiles around 52 distribution records, and summarises naturalists' observations of the animal's behaviour and feeding. Those concerned with the ecology and conservation of arboreal marsupials generally, and the Greater Glider in particular, should find this work useful as it compiles many interesting and important records of this the largest and most conspicuous of the gliding possums. (*The Victorian Naturalist*, 123 (6), 2006, 376-382)

### Introduction

The Greater Glider *Petauroides volans* (family Pseudocheiridae) is the largest (900 – 1700 g) of the gliding marsupials (Strahan 1995). It is strictly folivorous, feeding on the buds, shoots and leaves of mainly eucalypt species, and it is hollow and forest dependent (Strahan 1995; Menkhorst and Knight 2001; Lindenmayer 2002; Goldingay and Jackson 2004). The current distribution of *P. volans* is from Victoria (Vic) in the south to the tropic of Capricorn in Queensland (Qld) in the north. It is found mainly among the tall wet forests within this range. The variable coat colouration of the Greater Glider extends from black with a white underbelly through mixtures of grey and cream, although pure white individuals are also reportedly common (Strahan 1995; Menkhorst and Knight 2001; Lindenmayer 2002). The conservation status of this species is stated as 'common' or 'secure' for the three states it inhabits (Menkhorst and Knight 2001; Goldingay and Jackson 2004). The historical and more recent records of this species in *The Victorian Naturalist* are at present scattered in many articles and naturalists' notes, and this adds to the inaccessibility and under-appreciation of these records. We have aimed to bring these records together in a single summary to augment other readily accessible information on the natural history of this species (Strahan 1995; Menkhorst and Knight 2001; Lindenmayer 2002). Such compilations may ultimately assist with

conservation appraisal. This paper presents an annotated chronology of Greater Glider records from a desktop survey of all volumes of *The Victorian Naturalist*.

### Greater Glider records from *The Victorian Naturalist*

Forbes-Leith and Lucas (1884) provided a checklist of the mammals of Victoria, and indicated that the 'Great Flying Phalanger' *Petaurus taguanoides* (= *P. volans*) was a resident species. Following this, a group of (presumably dead) 'Great Flying Phalangers' were exhibited by Mr A Coles of Melbourne at a 'conversazione' of the Club held on 14-15 June 1894 (Anon 1894). On 14 August 1905, Mr AE Kitson presented a 'skeleton, with skin attached, of a flying squirrel, *Petauroides volans*, found on a barbed-wire fence at Allambee East, South Gippsland. This animal had been caught by the foot on a barb, and had slowly and miserably perished' (Anon 1905). Batey (1907) wrote that the 'Great Brush Squirrel, *Petaurus taguanoides*', was:

never very plentiful; some 12 years ago [1885] I found one drowned in a large dam at Newham. They were more common in the Macedon region, further north, than with us [at Sunbury district]. Mr W. Thom told me of two albinos he had seen at Bullengarook.

At a meeting of the club held on 12 February 1923, Mr HB Williamson exhibited a 'Flying Phalanger, picked up dead at Dandenong' (Anon 1923). However, no

specific name for the specimen was provided, and it may or may not have been the Greater Glider. Fleay (1928) commented that Greater Gliders are among the 'favourite game' of the Powerful Owl *Ninox strenua*. The ability of the Powerful Owl to take the Greater Glider also has been noted more recently (i.e. Galbraith 1974).

In November 1931 near Mitta Mitta, CW Brazenor of the National Museum, Melbourne discovered a Greater Glider in a big Blue Gum. 'It was, however, impossible to take it alive, the tree being too big to fell' (Brazenor 1931).

David Fleay (1933a) provided a then authoritative article on the biology, habitat and distribution of the Greater Glider, including notes on its captivity, feeding, nesting and breeding habits, and vocalisations. Captive animals favoured Long-leaved Box *Eucalyptus gonicalyx* or *E. nortonii* and Common Peppermint *E. radiata* (Fleay 1933a). A photograph of Manna Gum *E. viminalis* habitat used by Greater Glider 'in a gully at Upper Beaconsfield (Vic.)' was included with Fleay's (1933a) paper on the species. Other distributional records included a capture at Delegate, New South Wales (NSW), a pair at Traralgon, a pair at Daylesford which were captured and taken into captivity (see also Fleay 1935), one or more at Beaconsfield, and observations of several animals at Mitta Mitta in January 1933 including a female taken from Callaghan's Creek when a Blue Gum *E. globulus* was felled. At Bendoc, Fleay stated that 'it was not uncommon to find suspended bodies' in barbed wire used to fence off farms. 'These animals had caught their volplaning membranes on the sharp barbs when swooping low, and so had died a miserable and lingering death'. Other reports of dead Greater Gliders were the result of animals crossing open spaces on the ground and falling prey to the fox *Vulpes vulpes*. In relation to its distribution and habitat, Fleay (1933a) stated:

Favouring the tallest timber areas, and generally inhabiting dead trees in the gullies of mountainous country, the range of *Petauroides volans* extends down the highlands of Eastern Australia from Southern Queensland to Victoria. Further north in Queensland a smaller sub-species represents the only other member of this very interest-

ing genus. In Victoria I have never observed the species further west than the Ballan-Daylesford forest, though more western records may have been established ... Apparently the species never reached the suitable environment of the Otway region...

In November 1942, a photograph of a 'Greater Flying Phalanger' appeared in an article by Carthew (1942). However, in the December issue of *The Victorian Naturalist* it was clarified that this was erroneous, and the caption for the photograph should have stated 'Yellow-bellied Possum-Glider, Or Flying Phalanger, *Petaurus australis*' (Anon 1942).

Norman Wakefield recorded the 'Dusky Glider *Schoinobates volans*' (= *P. volans*) as a sub-fossil from a number of cave deposits in Victoria including M-27 and M-28 (Wakefield 1960a) and Pyramids Cave (Wakefield 1960b; 1967). The presence of the species in the deposits was attributed to the predatory action of Quolls *Dasyurus* spp. which caught Gliders when they occasionally descended to the ground. Smaller marsupials were thought to have been deposited by owls. The cave deposits are of Holocene-Late Pleistocene age (see also Harris and Goldingay 2005).

In 1960, Mr Frank Buckland of 'Sunny Corner', Mallacoota, contributed some notes on gliders which mainly pertained to their acrobatics. He stated that in the bushlands of East Gippsland, the Greater Gliders could be heard especially when Red Ironbark *E. sideroxylon* is in flower (Buckland 1960). However, according to Wakefield (1970), Buckland's records are actually of Yellow-bellied Glider and not Greater Glider. Wakefield (1970) stated that the voice and gliding accomplishments of the Yellow-bellied Gliders had been credited erroneously to the Greater Gliders, 'which is, in fact, a sedentary, slow-moving, silent animal of minor gliding ability'.

Wakefield (1960a) suggested Greater Gliders were 'quite plentiful in heavy forest' to the north of Buchan. In early December 1960, a Greater Glider was seen while spotlighting near Mount Tara at Buchan (Anon 1961a). In June 1961, on a mountain road between Walhalla and Woods Point (towards Matlock), Mrs Ellen Lyndon found remains of a Greater Glider

which had been taken by a Wedge-tailed Eagle *Aquila audax* (Lyndon 1961).

We stopped and backed the car to look at it [the Wedgetailed Eagle], curious to know what it had been feeding upon. Hunting around in the undergrowth, I came on the still warm carcass of what appeared to be a large black possum, with thick soft fur and a long ringed tail. It proved to be the rear half of a Dusky Glider (*Schinobates volans*) [= *P. volans*], the largest of the glider-possums and the first of its species that we had seen. Unfortunately, the front quarters and the body contents had been completely eaten by the eagle. Lying flat, with membranes extended, black above and white below, the shape was oddly kite like. From toe to toe across the rump the measurement was twenty inches. The small pink soles of the hind feet bore knobby clawless "thumbs" and two of the toes were joined in the one enclosing skin to form the double combing nail, or, more properly speaking, the syndactylous toe.

Anon (1961b) noted that the popular name 'Dusky Glider' is used in David Fleay's (1947) *Glidens of the Gum Trees*. Subsequently, Garnet (1962) highlighted that the wide range of common names for the species often led to confusion, even for experienced naturalists. Wakefield (1963) supported Fleay's suggestion that 'Dusky Glider' should be universally adopted, despite the occasional white specimen. Wakefield (1963) also reported that the species 'is quite abundant in the mountain forests of the eastern half of Victoria, but it does not occur anywhere west of Port Phillip Bay'. Some recent observations made by Mr J Hyett of Croydon also were detailed:

On the night of January 19, 1963, ten Greater Gliders were seen at Myers Creek, several miles north of Healesville, on trees along the main road. Most were very high in the eucalypts, but one was seen at twenty feet on a mass of Twining Silkpod (*Parsonia straminea*). Its body was well spread as it climbed over the plant, so that the gliding membranes could be seen easily, joining the forelimbs at the elbows. It was observed to eat several leaves of the silkpod.

At Yellingbo, a Powerful Owl was perched in a Black Wattle (*Acacia meurnsii*) overhanging the stream. Gripped in its talons was a Greater Glider whose head had been eaten. The owl regurgitated a pellet as we were watching it. This was recovered and found to contain glider fur, small fragments of skull

bones, and the wing covers of two species of longicorn beetles.

On 6 July 1963, two Greater Gliders were found whilst spotlighting near Powelltown, and it was reported that one of these animals was 'rather low in a large messmate' (King 1963). In 1965, the Fauna Survey Group observed six Greater Gliders (Anon 1965; 1966a). These were for 18 May in Blue Gum *E. globulus* subsp. *bicostata* at a locality 10 miles north-west of Buchan (by NA Wakefield), 19 and 20 May in Messmate *E. obliqua* and Manna Gum *E. viminalis* along Tulloch Ard Road near Buchan (by NA Wakefield and J McCallum); 29 May on Britannia Creek Road and at Yellingbo (by W King); and on 6 November a Yellow-bellied Glider was seen (also by W King) in a *Eucalyptus ovaia* tree at Woori Yallock (Anon 1966a).

On 9 May 1966, Ms V Parry addressed a general meeting of the Club on her Masters of Science research at Monash University on Kookaburras. She stated that during the study, Greater Gliders were 'predatory on the eggs of Kookaburras, and that these invaders were driven away fiercely from the region of the nest' (Anon 1966b). A record of the 'Greater Glider' was also provided for Powelltown/Labertouche State Forest (Anon 1967).

In June 1966 and June 1967, the Mammal Survey Group studied a small area of secondary regrowth forest south of the Darlimurla township, South Gippsland (Seebeck *et al.* 1968). Greater glider was recorded as:

Not common in the area. Four specimens were seen, all feeding high up in the trees.

On two occasions the food tree was identified as Mountain Grey Gum, *Eucalyptus cypellocarpa*. Animals were seen feeding between 7.40 pm and midnight.

Seebeck *et al.* (1968) also stated that the "Squirrel" of South Gippsland of the 1880s (citing *The Land of the Lyre Bird*, second edition by South Gippsland Development League 1966) referred 'probably' to both *Petaurus* and *Schinobates* (= *P. volans*).

Towards the end of 1967, some spotlighting was undertaken by a party of field naturalists in the Upper Thompson Valley (Anon 1968). At 11 pm, a Greater Glider was seen and reported as

Jet black; fine big chap; slow movement, pretending to hide. Some noise from us and up he goes a bit, across on to a branch to take up the stance of the textbooks (expecting a fee perhaps?). But how poor the textbooks are, and what would the soap advertisements give for this brilliant black and white?

At 12.25 am, another Greater Glider was seen, and reported as 60 feet up (Anon 1968).

Fryer and Temby (1969) conducted a mammal survey at Stockman's Reward, north-east of Marysville, during May 1967 and May-June 1968. Twenty-seven Greater Gliders were counted during spotlighting in 1967 but only 10 were found in 1968. The difference between counts of Greater Gliders on each trip was thought to be related to the drought at that time.

Even the habitually wet area dried out excessively during the drought and many of the eucalypts on the hills died. In the valleys undergrowth was killed and the young gums, the main supply of food for the Greater Gliders, dried out considerably. As the Greater Glider population in 1967 was quite concentrated, some had to leave to find new areas of food trees and this could explain the fewer sightings of Greater Gliders in 1968.

Fryer and Temby (1969) also noted that several animals were seen whilst gliding 'often between trees about ninety yards apart.'

O'Donnell (1970) reported on a 'quite plentiful' Greater Glider population in the Porepunkah district, north-eastern Victoria. At least seven animals were seen in this area in 1967-1968. Some of these animals were observed feeding on *E. globulus* subsp. *bicostata*, *E. radiata*, *E. viminalis*, Red Stringybark *E. macrorhyncha*, Broad-leaved Peppermint *E. dives*, Long-leaved box *E. goniocalyx*, Wonga-vine *Pandorea pandorana*, Blackwood *Acacia melanoxylon* and Hazel Pomaderris *Pomaderris aspera*. An albino Greater Glider seen at Mount Buffalo also was mentioned, as well as several other arguably doubtful Porepunkah records from animals that were only heard and not seen. A caption provided by the Editor stated that the Greater Glider is regarded as silent, and some of these records from vocalisations may have in fact been *Petaurus australis*. For additional comments on the supposed

vocalisations of Greater Glider and the confusion with *P. australis* see Rodda (1929), Fleay (1932, 1933a, b, 1947, 1954) and especially Wakefield (1970).

In February 1970, two Greater Gliders were spotted near Tram Creek in the Upper Lerderderg Valley; one in *E. radiata*, the other in Mountain Grey Gum *E. cypellocarpa* (Deerson *et al.* 1975). At that time, these were the most westerly sightings of the species in the Mammal Survey Group's records. Other Greater Glider records from this area included one seen on Campaspe Road in August 1969 in a dead Messmate *E. obliqua*; and another 11 km north-east of this locality in 1967 (Deerson *et al.* 1975). Hampton and Seebeck (1970) conducted a mammal survey in the Mount Macedon region, and although no Greater Gliders were found, they mentioned that the species was known to occur at that time just outside the area of their survey. Also mentioned were the earlier records provided by Batey (1907). Wakefield (1970) recorded Greater Gliders in the Yellingbo area, central Victoria in 1965 and 1966.

Anon (1974) reported that on 16 and 17 February 1974 the Greater Glider was observed during spotlighting, in the vicinity of Mt Baw Baw. Some were also spotlighted at the Easter Camp around Mt Cobbler and Mt Speculation. 'An unusual incident was the observation at close quarters of a Greater Glider sitting in the middle of the road. It had apparently landed there between two parties setting out in cars to spotlighting areas' (Anon 1974). Zirkler (1974) stated that Greater Gliders are known to occur at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, NSW.

Gilmore (1977) spotlighted 11 Greater Gliders in a survey of the Stradbroke area of South Gippsland, and noted that the species was widespread in the taller stringybark and gum forest but was not recorded in *E. nitida* or *E. considiniana*. Anon (1979) reported Greater Gliders seen on a trip to Mt Cobbler and Mt Speculation. Dixon (1979) lists the Greater Glider as present in the Alpine Area of Victoria and NSW. Ambrose (1979) records Greater Glider as 'uncommon' in the Wallaby Creek Catchment, and as an obligate tree hollow user.

Van Dyck and Gibbons (1980) noted Greater Gliders as 'usually major components' of regurgitated pellets of Powerful Owls. They also cited Seebeck (1976) and Fleay (1968) in stating that 'Powerful Owls from Victoria to Queensland show a definite preference for large, slow moving prey items such as Ringtails and Greater Gliders'. Brunner *et al.* (1981) stated that Greater Gliders are recorded as prey of the feral cat *Felis catus* in Victoria (also see Coman and Brunner 1972).

Callanan (1981) undertook 42.4 hours' spotlighting at Wallaby Creek (September 1974 – November 1978). Three Greater Gliders were seen in mature Mountain Ash forests and another two were spotted in mixed eucalypt forests. Seebeck *et al.* (1983) employed stag-watching in November 1980 and July 1981 and seven Greater Glider observations were made along the Snobs Creek Road (south of Eildon) and a further 11 were made at Upper Thomson River (north of Toorongo).

Nicholls and Meredith (1984) made 98 Greater Glider observations in the Mt Timbertop region between 1971 and 1976. Densities were quite high – they made 42 sightings in 4 km of spotlighting in riparian and *E. radiata* forests along Eight Mile Creek, and five individuals were known to inhabit two trees adjacent to the Timbertop School. Only dark-phase individuals were recorded in the region; in the Strathbogie Ranges (50 km west) light-phase individuals were reportedly common. Greater Gliders were reportedly more numerous in *E. radiata* open forests, which were typically in gullies and on the wetter foothill ridges, as well as in riparian vegetation associated with the valleys of the major streams. However, they were apparently less numerous in the *E. dives* open forests on the dry foothill ridges.

Loyn *et al.* (1986) recorded the Greater Glider in pellets of the Sooty Owl *Tyto tenebricosa* from Thurra River, East Gippsland. Read (1987) recorded Greater Gliders at Bodalla State Forest (NSW). The Mammal Survey Group spotlighted Greater Gliders on Errinundra Plateau in December 1986 (Anon 1987). Regan *et al.* (1988) conducted a mammal survey in East Gippsland in a Callistemon thicket and adjacent sclerophyll woodland domi-

nated by *E. obliqua* and *E. dives*. Seven sightings of Greater Glider were made in the woodland and traces of the species were also detected in fox and/or dog scats in that area.

Dixon and Huxley (1989) reviewed notes, photographs and mammal collections of Donald F Thomson, which are now held in Museum Victoria. This review included details of a juvenile Greater Glider specimen which was photographed (reproduced in Dixon and Huxley 1989) and collected at Mooroolbark, Vic. in December 1932 (DTC 13; skull); and a male specimen (DTC 12 1229; skin and skull) collected at Toorloo Arm, Gippsland Lakes on 31 March 1934. Dixon and Huxley (1989) also commented that the Greater Glider

is an inhabitant of eucalypt-dominated habitats; from low open coastal forests to the tall forests of the ranges, and low woodland west of the Dividing Range. As a result of urban development it is now unlikely to be a common inhabitant in the Mooroolbark area.

Lindenmayer (1992) recorded Greater Glider in the Mountain Ash forests in the Central Highlands of Victoria, and also commented that in this area it is 'more commonly observed emerging from tall, large diameter trees with hollows (see also Lindenmayer *et al.* 1991). Wallis *et al.* (1996) recorded Greater Glider in scats of the Fox but not those of the Cat, from a collection from Dandenong Ranges National Park (NP).

Garth and Garth (1996) regularly recorded Greater Gliders whilst spotlighting at Badger Weir Park, Healesville (now within Yarra Ranges NP). They stated that:

Most evenings around fifteen minutes around dusk, a pair of Greater Gliders leave their hollow in the Manna Gum and make a spectacular glide over our heads to commence their foraging in the mixed species forest upstream. On one notable occasion in October 1995, the female did not glide, and was observed to be carrying a juvenile on her back. This youngster has been seen leaving the nest tree with its parents up until August 1996.

Taylor (1996) also spotlighted a Greater Glider with pouch young near Healesville. This rare sighting was made on 27 September 1995 at 21.35 hours in wet sclerophyll forest.

Reid (1997) reviewed records of the Greater Glider feeding on Mistletoes and proposed that they may reduce local populations of Mistletoe species. These feeding observations were on *Muellerina eucalyptoides* in Boola Boola State Forest (Henry 1985); *Amyema pendula* in Coolangubra State Forest, NSW (Kavanagh and Lambert 1990); and *A. pendula* near Amidale, NSW (Porter 1990).

In reference to mammal introductions on Wilsons Promontory NP, Seebeck and Mansergh (1998) stated that one Greater Glider 'of unknown origin, was liberated in the Vereker Range in February 1929 and another, at a site not identified, in March 1934' (see also Wescott 1998). The species 'is widespread in the South Gippsland Highlands and foothills to the north of Corner Inlet' (Norris *et al.* 1979). Seebeck and Mansergh (1998) also commented that the natural absence of Greater Glider from Wilsons Promontory reflects the 'island' nature of this NP.

Calder and Calder (1998) noted that the Greater Glider occurs 'down from the Plateau' at Mount Buffalo NP. van der Ree (1999) collated observations of wildlife becoming entangled with barbed-wire fencing from various sources including naturalist groups, professional societies and databases of government departments and wildlife carers. He found two records of the Greater Glider entangled in barbed wire in Victoria, six records for NSW and four records for Queensland.

## Conclusion

In summary, 96 reports were identified with information on Greater Gliders. These produced around 52 distribution records, excluding those from the same locality and fossil records. The records span the period from pre 1905 to 1998. The records include observations of the species utilising 10 eucalypt species: *E. cypellocarpa*, *E. dives*, *E. globulus*, *E. goniocalyx*, *E. macrorhyncha*, *E. nortoni*, *E. obliqua*, *E. ovata*, *E. radiata* and *E. viminalis*. Feeding was observed on six non-eucalypt species: *Acacia melanoxylon*, *Amyema pendula*, *Muellerina eucalyptoides*, *Pandorea pandorana*, *Parsonsia straminea* and *Pomaderris aspera*. There are also records of the Greater Glider as prey of seven predators:

Cat, Dog, Fox, Wedge-tailed Eagle, Quoll, Powerful Owl and Sooty Owl. Greater Glider is also recorded as predator i.e. on Kookaburra eggs. Hence, *The Victorian Naturalist* is a particularly rich source of records on the Greater Glider. These records are a useful supplement to other information available from museum holdings and wildlife Atlas records.

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